Ramagrama Excavation II

- Sukra Sagar Shrestha

Actually the initiation of Ramagrama Excavation started when LDT/DOA filed an application to the UNESCO for the nomination of Lumbini, Tilaurakot and Ramagrama Stupa in the World Heritage List. UNESCO enlisted Lumbini immediately in World Heritage List but sent a team of archaeologist, geophysical surveyors to investigate further on the subject for the qualification of Tilaurakot and Ramagrama Stupa to be enlisted in the World Heritage list.

The team arrived in Nepal in 1997 and investigated the candidate sites of Tilaurakot and Ramagrama Stupa area and conducted the geophysical surveys. On the following year the team even conducted an archaeological excavation in Tilaurakot. The report of excavation is still awaited.

While conducting the geophysical investigation with Resistivity survey (Earth Resistance) and Magnetometer survey (Fluxgate Gradiometer), Magnetometer survey showed some very distinctive anomalous picture of a monastic complex on the North West of the main stupa. Then DOA planned for an excavation in order to check the result of geophysical survey. The first excavation in 1997 was conducted merely as a trial trenching.

The first season's result brought out some very interesting results but very short period of forty five days and five trenches of four by four meters digging brought more questions than the straight answer. Therefore the excavation was lengthened year after year. The first year's excavation brought out the result of the site to be occupied from very early historical period but the monastery could not be opened fully. Therefore second year's fieldwork is planned and excavation this time was conducted for seventy five days. It could open the monastery in maximum exposure but it also brought further question about the new structures seen in the south of the monastic complex. Therefore third season's fieldwork was planned for three months long period. This is in total, the result of three season's field work which is presented here with.

Site Description

The site of Ramagrama is stretched North South after the river Jharahi was diverted from east of the
stupas in 1986/87. Before that the stupa was surrounded by that river from three sides e.g. North, West and South. Once the river was diverted, the stupa complex then changed into an island topography. The running river Jharahi flows in the east and dried old course of the same river on all three remaining sides. But still a small strip of land is left on North as a land bridge. (Pl. 1)

The whole area inside the island is cultivated except the area occupied by the stupa and south of it which is fenced with barbed wire. The area south of the stupa is planted with different trees and further beyond the fence is left fallow which extends down to the old river course. The new trees were transplanted by Lumbini Development Trust in collaboration with Bussi-No-Kai Japan who also donated to erect a temple site in 1998/1999 to the south west of the stupa complex at a distance of nearly hundred fifty meters away.

Relief Of The Stupa

Ramagrama stupa is located almost in the middle of the island area. The relief of the stupa is not evenly raised now. The south and eastern sides of the stupa is raised evenly to the centre forming the top where as north and west have more falls. The contour of the west side falls are more steeper than north side. They were sculpted out by the trees grown on these sides. Once the trees fell down the roots of them made holes and cracks.

The position of the stupa does not seem centrally located inside present barbed fence. It rather goes north from the fence in north and north west corner. The fence is considered as the boundary of the stupa complex and area beyond that is private land. Therefore the northern plinth of the stupa may go out of the fence and fall in the private land. Contrary to the north, the southern fence rather goes away from the plinth. The geophysical survey conducted in 1997 did not record any archaeological remains up to ten meters inside the fence in south.

The total height of the stupa at present from surrounding cultivated surface is 6.85 mtr. (Fig. 3)

The destruction features are noted in north and western side of the stupa. The cutting of the trenches in unlucky field to the north west of the stupa showed big concentration of brickbats with some distinctive bricks which were definitely used in the stupa plinths.

There were many trees grown on the stupa till few years back (Pl. II). The last and tallest tree still survives on south western side of the stupa. The tree is known in Nepali as Karna (botanical name: Albizia odoratissima) This tree also needs to be cut down at an earliest so that there will not be further destruction of the stupa by its roots (Pl. IIIc, d).

In my previous report of Ramagrama excavation, the historical account of the site has been already presented with finds encountered during first trial trench excavation. In second year the excavation was conducted in full scale and the area was extended further south. Similarly in third year the excavation was extended towards the stupa also.

For the scientific record and to correlate different structures and findings, the whole site is divided into different squares. Keeping in view the size of the main stupa, the first square is made accordingly and the stupa is encased into a fifty meters square (50x50 m.). Then same size of the squares are extended in all four cardinal directions. In relation to the shape and size of the land and distribution of the subsurfacial archaeological remains, the area is planned to be covered by 88 squares of fifty meters by fifty meters. They are eight in west east and eleven in north south directions. The squares are numbered from top left to down right. The main square encasing the stupa falls on the square number 44. Other archaeological remains fall on the squares 27,35,36,39,43,44, and 67. The present excavation site with the monastic complex,
praying platform and the stupa falls on the square number 35, 43, and 44 respectively. Only known sites are noted in the particular squares. There could be other monuments unnoticed underground. They could be marked easily once they are traced.

Each square of fifty meters are divided again into four quadrants of 25 x 25 m. and marked alphabetically into ABCD in clockwise direction from top left. These quadrants are further divided into twenty five trenches of four meters by four meters leaving one meter baulk in between. Thus each square of fifty meters block has hundred trenches. This makes the digging manageable and scientific (Fig 1).

Twenty five trenches of ABCD quadrants are marked alphabetically from top left in small letters a, b, c, d, to z except one letter ‘O’. The letter ‘O’ is thought to be misleading with zero. Therefore it is taken out. (Fig 1)

All the findings and correlations are recorded in relation to bigger grids, quadrants, trenches and layer numbers.

Thus first number represents the big square (50 x 50 m) followed by a capital letter ABC or D for quadrants. Then comes the small alphabet which gives the particular trench and lastly the layer number in roman numeral. Therefore (for example) 35 Bd II means second layer of the trench d from quadrant B of the square number 35.

The trench plan printed in my previous report in Ancient Nepal-142 Pl.7 therefore is slightly changed. The writer regrets the inconvenience caused to the readers.

Main Monastic Complex

After the excavation work of two years, it is now clear that the big complex coming out with huge walls turned out to be a modest monastic complex.

The monastic complex measures 13.5 x 13.5 m. having 2.4 m. wide rooms and courtyard of 4.8 m square. The size of the wall varies from 1.15 to 1.25 m thick and the bricks have only 6 x 19 x 30 cms. and 6 x 23 x 36 cms. in size. Surprisingly no evidence of rooftiles are recovered showing the roofs to be covered by organic materials most probably the thatch.

All the outer walls of the monastery remain intact at least in foundation level with some bits of bricks robbing mostly in probable door locations. In southern façade of the monastery, there are as many as 32 courses of brick left and in eastern part there are 23-28 layers still remained in situ. But tops of them are uneven and also no door frames are encountered. They might have been robbed away or destroyed in course of time due to being organic material.

The depth of the foundation trench while laying first bricks are also not in even level. In trench 35 Cp in east the lowest layer of the bricks is 220 cm. in north (tr. no.35 Ch) 195 cm and in west and south are 215 (tr. 35 Cm) and 220 cm (tr. 35 Ct) respectively.

The inner room size of the compartment ranges from 205 cms to 240 cm., without any dividing walls. Probably the rooms were also divided by wooden materials.

The location of the doors are not found with any tangible objects like door jamb and door frames. But a door hook is found from the trench (pl IX d)

One door is surely in SW. corner (tr 35Cs) and another probably two in the east (tr 35Cu and 35 Cp) where same type of wall destruction above the foundation level is noticed. In north may be two in trenches (tr 35C an and 35 Cl) and in western part, since the wall is not exposed fully can not be said and could not be detected.

Unlike in outer walls, the inner walls of the monastic complex is nearly all robbed away leaving only seven courses of bricks in western side (Pl. VI e) where as in north three layers of the bricks are left in sporadic condition (tr. 35 Cg) and in south also
same condition prevails. The eastern side is left with only ghost walls filled in with brickbats after the bricks from the wall were robbed away. The remains of the ghost wall could easily be detected in sections. The exit to the courtyard is in southeast corner of the complex.

**Discard Of The Monastic Complex**

The monastic complex seems collapsed and discarded well before the last flood occurred. This is shown by the brickbats concentration in almost all the trenches laid over the monastic complex. The brickbats concentration goes below and is well overlaid by yellow floody deposit. When did the flood occurred is unknown because of the lack of C14 dating facility.

There is a votive stupa erected at the center of the courtyard. The placement of this stupa is little deviated towards southwest by 20 cms. The size of the courtyard is 4.80m square, exactly double the breadth of the monastic room-size. The stupa does not seem contemporary to the monastic complex because the last flood occurred after the abandonment of the monastery and this votive stupa is found constructed on top of that last flood layer. The placement of the stupa seems chance placement at the center of the monastic courtyard. The stupa has six courses of bricks and seems erected from the salvaged bricks from surrounding (See PI XI and Fig 5).

**Trenching In Riverbed On South**

A long trench of one meter by twenty meters was laid down a meter away from the alignment exposed in the riverbed to the south of the main stupa. The trench runs from west to east starting from the exposed brick alignment. The trenches are cut in the size of one meter by four meters at the interval of one meter to the north where either bricks are exposed or alignments could be traced (Fig 10).

The trenches are cut in order to see if the structure seen in the riverbed extends towards north under the dry river. The structure was believed by the archaeologist to be the monastic complex described by the Chinese pilgrims Fa-hien and Hsieh Tsang in fourth and seventh century respectively.

The geophysical survey conducted by Bradford University Group on the south of the brick alignment also guessed the brick structures deep below the cultivated surface. The local people also talks about a big foundation wall and wide brick pavements few feet below the cultivated surface. They saw them while digging a grave for a Sadhu in 1985/86.

After going down for one and half meters, it was found only fallen bricks in two of the eastern trenches while in western trench a clear alignment of brick wall is traced. Therefore this trench is extended towards north again with the size of one and half by two meters. It falls due north of exposed wall in the river bed. The wall is found one meter sixty centimeters extended further north from the alignments which is below eighty centimeters from the present river surface. At the depth of two meters and ten centimeters the water table came up and further digging is stopped. (Pl VII C).

From this cutting it is found that this part of the structure is found to be cut and buried by the river at least 2.5 meters. Since the river is already diverted now, there is no threat of being further destruction any more.

**Wall Exposed On The Left Bank Of River Jharahi**

A small piece of the wall is found exposed in the left bank of river Jharahi to the east of the stupa. The alignment of it runs nearly for two meters in north south direction. The structure was unnoticed or neglected during the diversion act of the river in 1986/87. Archaeological value was underestimated, then.
The site was thoroughly checked this year and found that the alignment has six courses of the bricks left. To the right angle of it in south, a wall of 50 cm thickness runs towards west. This portion of the wall is found cut and thrown away during the diversion act of the river.

From the northern end of the alignment a single course of the brick further runs for more than 35 meters showing as if the road pavement or a courtyard complex.

The brick size in this site is 5 x 19 x 28 cms which shows the site to be younger in age than Sunga Kushan period.

A further dig to the east of the same spot would be fruitful to reveal the full structure in order to understand about the site. (Pl IV d)

**Trial Trenches In Garden Area**

UNESCO team who conducted the geophysical survey strongly recommended the trees on the south of the stupa to be cut down and clear the land in order to save the probable archaeological remains underneath. Those trees are already five years old and grown fully and have been the part of the landscape now. The trees were transplanted by LDT in collaboration with Bussi-no-Kai a Buddhist Organisation of Japan who also made a garden and a monument across the river in three Kattiga Land.

When talked about the octogenarians, there is a rare chance of finding any archeological remains underneath because the river has travelled many times to and forth in North South direction during their life time. The remains, if any, should have been washed away by the river and if left in pieces they will be well below the ground where a root section of a general tree can not reach there. Therefore it was decided to check the area anyway and cut some trenches in garden area in order to see the remains. The area was thoroughly checked and the trenches laid in different parts of the garden. Two trenches of one and half meter by ten meters in west, two one by ten meters and one two by five meters at the center was laid down. On the east of the garden again, one two by five meters and one by thirty meters trenches were cut down. The depth in all the trenches were achieved to two meters down. Nothing except the reverse side silt is encountered. This part of the land is found to be sterile of the monuments underneath (Pl VII d).

Therefore it is strongly recommended now not to clear away the trees from the area. There is very little chance of archaeological remains in this part of Ramagrama complex the transplantation is well done and luckily well placed.

**Opening Of The Central Stupa Structure**

The central square structure seen, in the magnetometer survey, measures 115 cms by 115 cms with six layer of the bricks. The structure extends up from 40 cms below the present surface of the land with two one and three courses of the bricks.

The aim of opening this structure is to understand about the purpose of this monument. Since it looks like a stupa and foreign deposit seen below it in western section of it has been decided to cut down in order to check the deposit and fully understand about the structure. The structure is removed layer by layer with photographing and drawing each layer before it is removed. The drawing is done with superimposed central point fixed each time vertically in the same spot with the help of a thread marked red in central point.

Surprisingly the deposit thought to be the foreign materials turned out to be the rain penetration which carried down the surface composition, and it was seen only in western section. The whole structure is cut down to the bottom and found the surface below the structure merely a flood deposit. Half of the
bricks at last layer are left in situ after seeing all the structure. The result is late erection of the structure which was raised only after the last flood occurred in the area. The flood deposition itself is after the abandonment of the monastic complex.

All the bricks used in this structure is found to be the size of 5 x 19 x 29 cms. The bricks are laid one upon another in the pattern as shown in the drawing (Fig 5). The structure was laid collecting the full size bricks around the stupa well after the abandonment of the monastic complex. (see also p 4)

Copper Coin

A copper coin is found from Northwest Corner of the monastery from the depth of 15 cms from top (trench 35 Ch). The coin is fairly preserved.

The size of the coin is 2.4 to 3.5 cms in diameter showing not in perfect circular shape. Similarly the thickness also varies from 2.4mm to 4.2 mm. The weight is 13.010 grams.

The coin is of Kushana period. There is a figure of a king wearing long coat down to the knee. The posture seems in walking with the feet apart. The right hand holds a lantern (?) in bent posture as if raising little up and left hand is raised up to elbow holding arrow or some type of club. The head seems wearing a pointed cap.

There are four letters embossed to the right of the figure. The legend reads ಪುರಾದ ಜೀವಿತ. The letters are of Brahmi from the periodic phase of Sunga Kushana.

On the reverse of the coin, there is a figure standing at the center and few letters in unintelligible condition. This side is much rusted therefore could not be deciphered properly. Such coin type was also reported from Tilaurakot coin hoards excavated by Risso University. Babukrishna Rijal has classified that under Buddha type copper coin of Kaniska.

Greyware

The greyware potsherds are found from the level below the long occupation layer of the monastic complex from inside the room part. The potsherds are collected from the depth of 275. cms down to the natural layer. The grey wares are coming along with the black and red wares.

The greyware potsherds are seen mostly from utensils than from other big pots. The edges of the gray ware are found bevelled either from inside or from outside. Knife edge bowls also are noticed. (Fig 8)

Unlike the other gray wares, the specimen from Ramagrama greywares are found dotted with some red spots showing some presence of brick grits. Therefore it could be surmised that the Ramagrama greywares may be of latter date (5-3rd century B.C.)

This year's excavation (2001 AD) brought to light the Mouryan structure of the stupa. The structure was touched at the end of the excavation season. Therefore could not be gone down to foundation level. However the plinth could be exposed in west and east showing the Mouryan structure to be little more than thirty three meters in diameters.

From the exposed structures in trench no 44 Ak and 44 Bm we can locate different phases of the stupa. The Mouryan structure is found to be tilted outwards and the second phase gave the supporting wall in west of which a piece is also found exposed in the trench 44 Aa. This phase could be from Sunga Kushan or even Gupta period. (PL V ab) The size of the Mouryan bricks are found to be 7 x 27 x 38 cms quite identical to the same phase of construction in Mayadevi temple of Lumbini. The size of the wall is still unidentified within stupa because it goes towards the centre. Only next seasons digging will give this picture.

The size of the bricks in second phase are 5 x 19 x 29 cms. Since no datable objects are unearthed, we
are not in a position to give definite date for the structures until further evidence is at hand. Further on we also have to see the relation between the structures in the west with the main stupa complex. This will have to be checked in the next excavation.

There is an entrance like structure exposed partially in south of main stupa in the trench 44 Dp. Once went down to average 45 cms from the surface, a skeleton is exposed which attracted hundreds and thousands of visitors to the site making it impossible to dig further on. Therefore the digging was stopped and the skeleton is reburied in situ for future digging.

From the study of skeleton, we can somehow make a presumption that the dead is not a ritual burial because it is not followed with any burial objects like any coins, pots and rings. The skeleton is also not adorned with any necklace, rings and so on. A ritual burial is always followed by dead objects. The dead is simply laid down with face upside and mouth wide open. Even there are brickbats inserted forcibly inside the mouth and the bone just below the knee is broken. It shows rather forceful murder. The dead is placed almost at the entrance from south and buried less than half a meter below the surface and further covered by rolled down brickbats from the stupa. (PL VII, Fig. 3)

Covering of the trenches and conservation notes for future renovation and conservation works.

Since the monastic complex in unlucky field is adequately excavated and well understood, only renovation and conservation works remain now to be undertaken in order to put the monument in exhibition. When this conservation work starts is unknown. Therefore the trenches have been refilled.

While refilling work was done, the excavated surface of the trenches were covered with the plastic sheets and put the earth on top. The walls of the monastic complex were also covered accordingly with tarpoline sheets but only on tops. The tops of the walls varies from the surface which falls from fifty to hundred twenty centimeters below present surface. Once the digging work for conservation and renovation starts one ha to wait for blue tarpoline to be seen then follow that to expose the monastic walls but he/she should not leave to consult the map of the excavation report.

The balk lines are left unexcavated. Therefore there is still a chance to understand more about the stratigraphic situation if one intends to.

For more details of the composition—-the eastern facade of the inner wall in the monastery is refilled with brickbats again because not a single brick was left in this part of the wall. All the bricks were taken out and filled with brickbats when the wall was robbed. The northern and southern part of the inner wall has partly original bricks up to five courses but that is also in western half only. Eastern halves of the walls were totally robbed away and remains in the form of ghostwall only. The western wing has complete wall still with seven courses of bricks left. This is the original part of the wall and bricks used on that part has more of the complete bricks. No brickbats are found used on that part of monastic wall (PL VIc)

The outer walls of the monastic complex is found complete surrounding on all four sides. There is no difficulty to recognize. They are all in alignment. The top of the walls are, as mentioned above, only half a meter to hundred twenty centimeters below the present surface of the land. The thickness of the monastic wall is nearly similar to Mayadevi temple. The thickness varies from a meter to hundred and fifteen centimeters. The southwestern corner of the wall is slightly tilted outwards.

The east and south foreground of the complex is found paved with brickbats up to three meters wide. The pavement may be in west and north as well, but since they are not opened can not be said preciously. The level of the pavement is hundred and thirty centimeters below present surface.

The central structure (stupa) has been found
latter addition. Although late in origin, it also should be incorporated in the renovation. Therefore should not be discarded. The details of the cutting is described in this report itself. (p 4 and 5)

A further study before renovation work if wanted would be more rewarding. The study could be made again after opening all the filled-in trenches by rechecking the stratigraphy from the baulk left.

At last I should thank my colleagues Pravin Shrestha -Photographer, Purna Bahadur Shrestha- Draftsman, and Mahesh Sharma office assistant who worked very hard and sincerely to accomplish the result of this important excavation. Despite their office duty I found them ever on time to accomplish additional duties conferred on them during whole excavation season.

I should not miss to thank and mention the names of Mr. Krishna Bahadur K.C archaeologist deputed from LDT, and Narad Yadav who cooperated very much during the entire period of excavation. Mr. Yadav remained all time cooperative even before and after the excavation by keeping an eye on excavated sites.

Reference:
1. Shrestha Sukra Sagar, Ramagrama Excavation Ancient Nepal Nr. 146, March 1999, P-4
2. ibid, P-5
3. ibid PII pic. 4
4. Coningham Robin and Armin Schmidt, Nomination of Tilurakot and RAMAGRAM (as part of a serial nomination of world Heritage sites associated with the life of the Lord Buddha), Report and Recommendations of a UNESCO Mission-1997, P-57
5. On personal consultation with Dayaram Dhobi and Babaji from the Village Deorca and Ujjani respectively.
1. AERIAL VIEW OF RAMAGRAMA STUPA AND RIVER JHARAHI
a. Ujjaini Village

b. Excavated trench from top of the Stupa towards west.

c. Excavated trenches and the stupa from west

d. Foreign Pilgrims at Ramagrama.

III RAMAGRAMA STUPA AND SURROUNDINGS
a. South West wall of the praying platform
b. Brick concentration on top of the foundation
c. Extended Western entrance and a wall of praying platform.
d. Wall structure exposed in river section to the east of the stupa

IV. EXCAVATION IN PROGRESS
a. b. Mouryian wall and supportive structure in west of stupa

c. Wall structure of later phase than Mouryian.

d. Mouryian structure in east of the stupa

V. DIFFERENT STRUCTURES
a. A rimsherd below the monastic foundation

b. Occupational layer below the monastic foundation

c. Inner wall foundation of the monastic complex in west

d. Northeast corner of the praying platform where the plinth of the stupa comes to join

VI. DIFFERENT FOUNDATIONS
a. A skull of the dead burial

b. The knee portions of the dead burial

c. A trench in south of the stupa in old river course

d. A trial trench in garden area.

VII. DIFFERENT SITUATIONS
VIII. FINDINGS 1 (The square on the surface are centimeter square)
IX. FINDINGS II (The square on the surface are centimeter squares)
XI. CUTTING OF CENTRAL STRUCTURE INSIDE COURTYARD
3. EXCAVATION OUTLOOK IN RAMAGRAMA
4. CROSS SECTION OF THE STUPA NORTH-SOUTH
5. DIFFERENT LAYER OF BRICKS IN CENTRAL STUPA STRUCTURE.
Grey ware bowl, Act No 43
Trench - 'n'

Grey ware bowl (Bevelled)
Trench - 'n' or 't'

Grey ware bowl (Bevelled)
Trench - 'n' or 't' - act No 73

8. GREYWARE POTSHERDS
9. TRENCHES IN THE SOUTHERN RIVERBED WHERE THE WALL IS EXPOSED SINCE LONG.
10. OUTER PLINTH OF THE STUPA AND THE PART OF PRAYING PLATEFORM.